



I've noticed something.

The small fries have been quickly evolving.


But whatever, Tama's been doing some evolving of her own, so no biggie.

Heart. Technique. Physique. Tama's been growing in all three areas these past few years.

Let me just say that Tama's graceful movements

are gonna blow everyone's minds ta-mashed bits!.

But wasn't the reason the small fries came out in the first place

because Shinju-sama was ?

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乃木若葉は
勇者である

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Countless stars filled the sky.

The stars outnumbered anything anyone has ever seen.

Several stars combined into an even brighter brilliance.

They fell like meteors.

Eating away at the earth--

--Such was the oracle Uesato Hinata received from the Shinju.

Signifying an incoming general offensive from the Vertexes.

And there was one more thing the Taisha had noticed.

Stars combining their brilliance... could possibly signify Vertex evolution, and in that case...

Just how far could that strengthen the Vertexes?

Would they just blindly increase in size, or would they guide their evolution into an intentional "form"?

The prophesized invasion occurred less than half a month after the oracle.

As they gazed down upon the metamorphosed landscape of the Jukai, the heroes stood at upon the fortified walls of Marugame Castle.

They could see the Vertex horde advancing from beyond the Seto Inland Sea.

Wakaba tried using her smartphone map to estimate the invading enemy's numbers. But it was a futile attempt as there were enough of them to cover the entire map. They were probably far beyond one or two thousand.

"Looks like they're quite literally 'innumerable'..."

Wakaba muttered with a stern expression on her face.

It would be a battle even more severe than the last-- She had known that fact beforehand, but no preparation would lessen the anxiety of seeing this situation face-to-face.

As Wakaba worried, Yuuna poked her in the cheek with her finger.

"Wakaba-chan, you're furrowing your eyebrows! No need to make such a scary face. We're definitely going to win."

"... You're right."

Thanks to Yuuna's smile, Wakaba was able to relax her furrowed brow. How could she call herself a leader if she allowed her anxiety to spread to the others?

- "Oh yeah, let's do the thing!"

- "What thing?"

Tamako tilted her head to the side at Yuuna's words.

- "You know, that thing where we form a circle with our arms around each other's shoulders and shout 'Let's do this!'"

- "A huddle, huh. Now that you mention it, ball game teams at my old school used to do that."

- "... That might be nice."

Wakaba, Yuuna, Tamako, and Anzu formed a circle shoulder-to-shoulder.

Chikage's eyes wandered as she hesitated about what to do.

- "C'mon, you too, Gun-chan!"

Yuuna held out her hand to Chikage.

- "... Okay."

Though a little confused, Chikage took her hand. Yuuna dragged her into the circle.

Wakaba then spoke up as leader.

- "We've found hope-- hope that humans have survived outside of Shikoku. And as long as we have that hope, we cannot afford to lose. Let's protect Shikoku until the end once more! Fight--"

- "ON!!!"

The five heroes' voices rang out in unison.

The strategy Anzu came up with to counter this general offensive was to use battle formations. The five heroes deployed to designated locations with assigned roles to intercept the Vertexes.

The interception was centered on Marugame Castle. The area around Marugame castle was chosen because it was still not covered completely covered in vegetation even during forestization.

In the areas in front of Marugame castle, the center, east, and west sides were to be stationed by one hero apiece. Anzu would stay on standby at the rear. The remaining person would rest.

The three in front line would defeat the attacking Vertexes, and any enemies that slipped through would be shot down by Anzu with her superior long-range attacks. If any of the three in front line were to show signs of fatigue, they would switch places with the one resting.

Judging by the sheer number of enemies, this battle was surely to be a prolonged one. But if they rested in rotation as they fought, they would be able to deal with the drawn-out fighting.



Furthermore, there was an extreme fatigue associated with using the trump card, so its use was to be avoided as much as possible.

"I'll stand front and center of Marugame Castle,"

Wakaba said after they huddled.

"That's where the Vertex horde will be concentrated at, so it's gotta be the most difficult position... Are you sure?"

Wakaba responded to Yuuna's concerns with calm dignity.

"That's exactly why I have to take that position."

"... Why? Because you want... to kill the most Vertexes...?"

Chikage stared long and hard at Wakaba as if to peek into her heart.

Wakaba shook off that gaze with a light laugh.

"No. It's to fulfill my duty as leader-- And above all, to protect the people of Shikoku."

Her friends' faces relaxed to hear her answer. Though Chikage alone seemed still somewhat unconvinced.

"Gotcha. Welp, take care of the front then, Leader!"

"Please don't push yourself too hard, Wakaba-chan!"

Tamako and Yuuna patted Wakaba on the shoulder.

"In that case, Wakaba-san takes the front, Yuuna-san takes the east side, and Tamacchi-sempai takes the west side. Chikage-san waits on standby for now. Let's begin!"

With the role of commander, Anzu gave out the instructions and the girls leaped to their respective posts.

Wakaba stood atop the Marugame City Office rooftop just in front of Marugame Castle. The cloud of Vertexes had already crossed the sea and were drawing near. Wakaba would be facing the brunt of the enemy's forces head-to-head.

"Just my luck, a place called 'Nogimaru', huh... I can't afford to mess up."

She held her sword grip as she gazed at the Vertex horde.

But at that moment--

She felt something wrap around her foot. Wakaba looked down. Countless black human-shaped shadows were grasping at her foot. The shadows' faces warped in anger and hatred as they looked up at her.

- " ...!"

Wakaba tensed up.

The mass of shadows was the past itself that had driven Wakaba to rage--

- "Wakaba-chaan!!!"

Just then, a loud voice rang out as if to scoop up Wakaba's consciousness from the dark depths. When she turned around, she saw Yuuna shouting with all her might from the roof of the building to the right.

- "Calm downwwwn!!! Hang in there, Leaderrrr!!!"

- "... Yeah, leave it to me!!!"

Wakaba shouted back in reply.

By that time, the black shadows wrapping around her foot had already disappeared.

The advance units of the Vertex horde approached the city office building.

At the same time, Wakaba unsheathed her sword.

One by one, Wakaba cut down the attacking Vertexes-- as Yuuna watched from the east side.

- "Awrrrighty! I gotta give it my best too!"

Yuuna clenched her fists and stood up to face the Vertexes.

On the west side--

Tamako was slaughtering Vertexes one after the other as she threw her bladed yo-yo.

- "Perfect! Wakaba's not gonna get all the glory! Tama's going ta-match her!"

The heroes faced off the Vertexes from the front and sides. This way they could avoid a situation like last time where someone could get surrounded by the Vertex horde.

As Anzu watched the three fight from the fortified walls of Marugame Castle, she held her hand to her chest in relief. Since they couldn't simulate how a battle with the Vertexes would go beforehand, there was no guarantee that the strategy would work out well. However, the strategy was succeeding at present.

- "Sorry, An-chan! There's one heading your way!"

Yuuna's voice rang out.

- "Please leave it to me!"



Anzu readied her crossbow and fired an arrow at the Vertex that had slipped past Yuuna. Though fighting large numbers of enemies was not Anzu's strong point, she excelled in the strategic, accurate kills of individual enemies over a long, wide range. She steadily shot down any Vertexes that escaped the fierce attacks of the three in the front line.

And since she was in the rear, she had a bird's-eye view of the progression of the battle.

- "Tamacchi-sempai, there's a group of them approaching from down below, skimming the earth's surface! You should be able to reach them with your bladed yo-yo!"

- "Roger! Leave it to Tama!"

- "Yuuna-san, you're sticking out a little too far! Fall back just a little, please!"

- "Got it!"

As she watched the situation develop, Anzu would direct the three in the front line from time to time.

Though she was somewhat timid by nature, that nature of hers made her the best suited for observing the situation and making precise, objective judgments. She never expected what she thought was her weakness to prove to be so useful. So in her heart, Anzu felt thankful for her timidity.

With just four heroes, they were able to maintain a complete advantage against numbers that surpassed even the last battle's.

As she watched them from the same castle walls as Anzu, Chikage grew impatient.

(I can't believe... I have to stay put here...)

There was no value in a hero that did not fight.

Chikage tightened her grip around her weapon, a scythe.

(How can I stay put... when I need to kill as many Vertexes... as I possibly can...)

- "Chikage-san."

As if to interrupt her thoughts, Anzu spoke up.

- "There is no need to rush. Every single member is vital for this style of battle to succeed. You will be needed soon."

- "... Needed..."

Hearing that word allowed Chikage to calm down at least a little.

(That's right... Even Nogi-san has to maintain pace with everyone in this fight... If I go off and do my own thing... then that makes me no different from that how that girl was before.)

Chikage took a deep breath and answered.

- "It's okay... Iyोजना-san. I'm not trying to rush anything... I was just getting tense watching the battle..."

She mustn't forget her role. Once someone tapped out, she would get her chance to bring down the Vertexes herself. She did not want to let the front line heroes' efforts go to waste.

About half an hour had passed.

The first to show signs of fatigue was Wakaba, who had been fighting the brunt of the Vertex horde front and center. Her signs of fatigue were ever so subtle that anyone else would've overlooked them, but none of it slipped past Anzu's eyes.

- "Wakaba-san! You're switching out. Please retreat!"

Once Anzu shouted from the castle walls, while Wakaba was swinging her sword--

- "I can still fi--"

She considered continuing to fight, but reconsidered.

This battle would be long and drawn-out. Buildup of fatigue could spell problems longer down the line. She could not afford to let their teamwork collapse as a result of her own stubbornness and selfishness.

Above all else, Wakaba decided to believe in Anzu's judgment.

- "Okay! Chikage, please take my place!"

- "Leave it to me..."

Her voice came from right behind Wakaba.

Chikage had already mobilized to the city office roof.

- "I... was about to slap some sense into you... if you were going to refuse to switch out..."

- "Well, I've learned from playing co-op video games with you. When it's time to shine, you shine. When it's time to back down, you back down... Right?"

Wakaba lightly held her hand up. Chikage slowly placed her own hand against hers in an awkward high five.

- "I'm counting on you, Chikage."

- "Take... a good rest..."

Wakaba leaped back to Marugame Castle as Chikage stood off against the Vertexes with her large scythe in hand.

- "Now then... Time for a massacre..."



Before Chikage left for the front line, she told Anzu to "support Yuuna as much as you can".

Since Yuuna's weapon was her fists, she had to get into extremely close quarters in order to defeat even one enemy, meaning she was at a disadvantage when it came to fighting swarms of enemies. Relying on Yuuna's strength alone could possibly cause the network of defense to crumble.

Anzu couldn't move from the castle walls, but as long as she had her crossbow, she could support Yuuna from a distance.

So in addition to dealing with Vertexes that escaped the front line, Anzu provided covering fire for Yuuna.

A Vertex tried to snap at Yuuna from behind, but was shot through by Anzu's arrow.

- "Thanks!"

Yuuna shouted as she felled a Vertex in front of her with her fist.

At around the same time, Anzu's voice rang out from the west side.

- "Anzuu!! Keep supporting Yuuna like that! Tama's A-OK by herself over here!"

- "Understood!"

With Anzu's support, Yuuna was able to fight as if the two of them were together, which in theory lightened her burden significantly.

- "Sorry for the trouble! You're such a big help, An-chan!"

Anzu replied wholeheartedly to Yuuna's words.

- "Not at all! Seeing you guys fighting in the front line has given me the courage to fight!!"

(Keep supporting Yuuna, huh... Now that was a real bluff, wasn't it!?)

Tamako thought that as she swung her bladed yo-yo.

Her weapon gave her a wide attack range, making her more suited for fighting groups compared to Yuuna, but considering the sheer number of enemies, that was not much consolation.

But now that she had told Anzu to help Yuuna, she couldn't just let their defense crumble on her side either.

Tamako's bladed yo-yo cut through the air as it felled the surrounding Vertexes.

Back at Marugame Castle's fortified walls, Wakaba rested to prepare for her next deployment.

From the walls, she could see the other heroes fighting.



Tamako boldly swinging around her bladed yo-yo. Yuuna making up for her lack of range with her boundless determination. Chikage taking on the most enemy attacks head-on as her substitute.

Anzu fulfilling the heavy responsibility as the last line of defense in this battle of attrition.

As she watched her friends battle, Wakaba's heart shuddered.

(Look, Nogi Wakaba... Look at how reliable your friends are. They've always been by your side.)

Wakaba stuck her sword down in the earth and gripped its handle.

The time to celebrate would be once the battle had been won.

The Vertexes' numbers were too much for her to allow herself to lower her guard for even a moment.

What Wakaba had to do on standby as she waited to redeploy to the front line was to believe in her friends and rest.

Eventually, Tamako was starting to show signs of fatigue after continuous fighting without Anzu's support.

- "Wakaba-san, please switch with Tamacchi-sempai!"

- "All right!"

Under Anzu's command, Wakaba leaped to where Tamako was.

- "Tamako, we're switching!"

- "Wakaba... did you see that!? Tama kept up the defense here all by herself. Amazing, right!?"

Tamako spoke proudly.

- "Yeah, you were amazing... Leave the rest to me and go take a break."

- "I will... I really am kinda tired."

Tamako stepped back with a wry smile on her face.

Wakaba gave her a high five as she stepped forward.

Immediately afterward, a Vertexes approached with its gigantic white body right before Wakaba's eyes. She drew her sword, and in a gleaming flash, the enemy was cut in two.

Upon seeing that, a smile formed on Tamako's lips.

- "Hey, Wakaba! When you were on standby, it was a real relief to have you right behind Tama. If Tama were to fall, you'd be right there to take care of things, so everything was fine. Even now that we've switched, I can rest assured knowing you've got this."

Strength isn't all about the power to fight.

The ability to give your friends a sense of security simply with your presence at their backs-- That was another sort of strength. That's what Tamako had felt during this battle.

- "There's no way I'd let you fall. Never."

Wakaba answered as she cut down Vertex after Vertex with her sword.

Tamako smiled wryly knowing that Wakaba would say something like that.

- "Haha, true that. Thanks, Wakaba. Welp, I'm counting on you!"

Tamako retreated back to Marugame Castle's fortified walls.

Wakaba shouldered Tamako's trust and continued swinging her sword.

In the heroes' perspective, about three hours had passed since the start of forestization--

They continued to overwhelm the Vertexes without significant injury thanks to their resting in rotation.

However, none of the heroes thought that they would be able to maintain the advantage to the very end.

The enemy had yet to use its full strength. They knew that.

Eventually, there was a shift in the enemies' movements. The Vertexes gathered into one place and fused.

- "Please be careful! They've begun molding into an evolved form!"

Anzu shouted from the castle walls.

It appeared the Vertexes had finally gotten serious.

Dozens, hundreds of Vertexes gathered and fused into a larger entity, taking a form unlike anything they had ever seen. The evolved Vertex took the shape of a giant serpent.

The current front line of heroes consisted of Wakaba at the east, Yuuna at the center, and Chikage at the west.

The serpent Vertex first went to attack Wakaba.

But Wakaba remained calm. She had seen several evolved Vertexes before. She would not lose her composure to them any longer.

Wakaba caught her breath and lay in wait for the enemy to arrive. She took the minimum necessary movement to dodge the tremendous lunge of the colossal body, simultaneously unsheathing her sword. The serpent Vertex's long body was cut in two.



All the heroes were left breathless by the vivid brilliance of the strike.

But Anzu alone noticed-- the sliced serpent was not dead.

-"Wakaba-san! It's still alive!"

At the sound of Anzu's voice, Wakaba jumped back almost entirely by reflex. The sliced serpent had formed into two separate serpents, each coming at Wakaba for a flanking attack. Had her reaction been but a moment delayed, the serpents could have bitten her in two.

Right when Wakaba leaped backwards, she lopped off the head of the left snake in a punishing strike. But even when she sliced off the serpent's head, both the head and the body once again took the form of whole serpents and began to move again. Furthermore, the split-off serpents did not decrease in size: by absorbing the surrounding common Vertexes, the serpents were able to regain the same size as the original.

With the Vertexes now forming three giant serpents, they continued to attack Wakaba.

-"If I keep cutting them, they just keep multiplying, huh...?"

Wakaba readied a dual-wielding stance with her sword in her right hand and her scabbard in her left, keeping the serpent Vertexes in check with scabbard strikes will felling common Vertexes with her sword.

But blunt-force scabbard strikes were unable to deal any sort of damage to the evolved Vertexes. The serpents were likely unstoppable unless enough damage was dealt to their entire body at once.

However, none of the five heroes present had a weapon that could damage the entire body of an enemy of that size.

-"Alrighty... Looks like it's Tama's turn here!"

Tamako stood up after having been resting on the castle walls. Now that the defensive line was threatening to collapse, this was no time to be resting.

Tamako shouted out to Wakaba who was facing the serpent Vertexes.

-"Wakabaa! I'm gonna use a trump card!!"

-"!? Wait, Tamako! In that case--"

-"No, I'm not gonna wait. Not gonna let you say you'll use it instead, either! If Tama doesn't take the spotlight today, there might not be a tomorrow!"

Tamako shut her eyes and felt for the Shinju's power dwelling in her body. She perceived her link to the Shinju and used it as an intermediary to access the Shinju's conceptual records, extracting the power of a "fairy" from within.

Tamako extracted-- Wan'yūdōu (輪入道, wheel monk).

Immediately afterwards, Tamako's bladed yo-yo changed form.

- "Huh!? Wait, Tamacchi-sempai, don't you think that's a little too big!?"

Anzu's surprise was no surprise. The bladed yo-yo had become several times the size of Tamako herself.

- "You can't throw it at that size, can you...?"

- "I sure can! I'll throw it using my guts! Just you watch, A~n~zu~--!!"

Tamako gripped the bladed yo-yo with both her hands and wound herself up round and round like she were preparing for a hammer toss. As she spun it around, the bladed yo-yo's wire lengthened, gradually increasing its radius of gyration.

- "Rrrrrrrrrr~ryaahhh!!"

And after building up enough centrifugal force, the gigantic bladed yo-yo flew off of the wire.

- "Wait!? Huh? It tore away from the wire!?"

- "Heh... No worries. That's how you're supposed to use it."

Once thrown, this bladed yo-yo would move in accordance to Tamako's will without the need to operate it with the wire.

The gigantic bladed yo-yo flew towards the serpent Vertexes as its bladed circumference spun with tremendous rotational velocity. The blades were also on fire. The blazing bladed yo-yo passed right beside Wakaba as she continued swinging her sword, and went straight for a serpent Vertex, tearing up its entire body at once. Without relenting, it even caught the torn enemy's body on fire, burning it to a crisp.

Like a living creature with a will of its own, the bladed yo-yo then spun about in the air, tearing into the other two serpents and burning them up.

- "... A-amazing..."

Wakaba stared in wonder at the bladed yo-yo's brutal intensity.

Still standing at the Marugame Castle's fortified walls, Tamako gave Wakaba a thumbs up.

Wakaba smiled and returned the gesture.

(If Tamako's control was off, that could've happened to me too, huh.)

Wakaba smiled wryly in secret.

The power of the bladed yo-yo was indeed incredible, but what was truly superb was Tamako's ability to control it precisely in close proximity to Wakaba which required Tamako to read her movements.

The blazing bladed yo-yo that had swept the serpents in the blink of an eye continued to mercilessly prey upon the other common Vertexes as well.

The Vertexes were unable to counter the wheel of fire and rapidly dwindled in number.



However... not all of the Vertexes were burned up.

"...!"

Suddenly, Tamako collapsed to her knees.

"Tamacchi-sempai!?"

Anzu rushed over and supported her body. Tamako's face started to look slightly pale.

"I-I'm okay... Just a little dizzy, that's all."

"But...!"

From the front lines, Wakaba's voice rang out as well.

"Tamako, are you okay!? The fairies' power must really be too much of a burden on the body!"

"No, Wakaba... I don't think this is the time to be saying that... Look ahead!"

"!?"

Wakaba shifted her attention to the group of Vertexes ahead--

The Vertexes that had been trampled down by Tamako's blazing bladed yo-yo began to gather once again. They began to fuse in far greater numbers than when they had formed the serpent.

"It's huge...!"

The Vertexes had taken a form that towered over even Wakaba as she stood on top of a rooftop. It was perhaps as big, or perhaps even bigger than Marugame Castle.

Perhaps they had taken such a gigantic form in order to make themselves impervious to even Tamako's use of Wan'yūdō's power.

Nearly all of the Vertexes that invaded Shikoku were conglomerating into a single unit, meaning even the enemy had decided to go all-in.

"Wakaba-chan! At that size, there's nothing we can do!"

Even as she heard Yuuna panicking, Wakaba calmly observed the Vertex's movements.

Careful observation of the enemy is essential to martial arts.

Having trained her body with that mentality since she was young, Wakaba never forgot to observe the enemy even in such an urgent emergency situation.

(If you form such a huge body so hastily, there has to be a weak seam somewhere...)

The movement of the gathering common Vertexes--

The balance of the whole gigantic body as it forms--

(... Got it.)

Wakaba found several weak spots in the forming gigantic body. She shouted out to the other heroes.

- "It's still got several weak spots in its body! If we hit it there before it finishes forming, we might be able to defeat it!"

- "Weak spots? But...!"

Yuuna had probably seen the enemy's weak spots as well. But it was the core of hundreds or thousands of Vertexes gathered together. She couldn't even approach it.

- "With Wan'yuudou... Tama can do it!"

Tamako jumped onto the bladed yo-yo that had returned to her nearby. If she used the bladed yo-yo imbued with Wan'yuudou's power, she could defeat common Vertexes while approaching the fusing gigantic body.

Tamako began to take off on her bladed yo-yo towards the gigantic Vertex body--

- "Tamacchi-sempai, I'll go too!"

--when Anzu jumped on board too.

Anzu had been fulfilling the commander role from Marugame Castle's fortified walls, but now that the battle had culminated into the final clash, both Vertex and Hero sides were at an all-out offensive. Thus, she had concluded that it was time for her to join the front line as well.

Anzu wasn't the only one who jumped on board Tamako's bladed yo-yo.

- "Tama-chan, An-chan, I can't just let you two go off into danger by yourselves!"

- "Agreed. I'll join you."

Yuuna and Wakaba.

- "That giant one... is mine."

And even Chikage.

All the heroes boarded the bladed yo-yo.

Tamako stared blankly at all her friends who had gotten onto her bladed yo-yo-- but eventually, she smiled.

- "Okay, then I guess we're all going then!"

The forming giant Vertex began shooting cannonball-shaped objects out of its abdomen to hinder the heroes' approach.

Tamako expertly flew the bladed yo-yo and dodged them all. She was nearing the limits of fatigue, but Tamako held her consciousness together through sheer force of will.



(Thanks... Yuuna. Tamako. Anzu. Chikage.)

Wakaba silently thanked the girls for being there.

To have her friends at her side, fighting alongside her. Just how much reassuring was that to Wakaba?

The giant Vertex had several weak spots. It would probably be difficult for Wakaba to destroy them all by herself.

But-- with her friends by her side, it was possible.

"Tamako, take the one straight ahead! Anzu, take the upper right one at 2 o'clock! Yuuna, take the lower one at 5 o'clock! Chikage, take the lower left one! I'll strike the top!"

Once Wakaba and Yuuna explained to the other three generally where the weak spots were, they were able to find all of the enemy's weak spots.

"Let's go!"

At the signal of Wakaba's voice, the four of them jumped off the bladed yo-yo while Tamako remained on-board. They each struck their assigned weak spot.

But--

As if the Vertexes had anticipated the attack, several common Vertexes gathered to protect the weak spots and surrounded the heroes. Not only could the heroes not attack the weak spots, but now they were open to a focused assault.

(Crap...!)

Wakaba began to panic at that situation. The tables were turned.

She let her friends fall into a trap and the gigantic Vertex was reaching complete fusion.

(There's-- no time to hesitate!)

To protect her friends.

To prevent any of the land's citizens from getting hurt.

Wakaba would now use a trump card.

She accessed the Shinju's conceptual records and extracted the power of a fairy-- and the next moment, Wakaba's body was imbued with a new power.

"Whooooaa!!"

Wakaba kicked back a common Vertex that had flown nearby, pushing her into another common Vertex which she kicked off of as well. With repeated use of Vertexes as footstools, the normally flightless hero was able to move through the air at tremendous speed.

At one point in time, Yoshitsune repeatedly leaped between boats floating in the ocean in fluid motions that made him appear to fly.

This technique is called hassou tobi (八艘飛び, eight boat leap).

The hassou tobi now bestowed Wakaba with incredible mobility through the air, allowing for her to quickly rush towards her friends in danger. Wakaba flew through the air as if gravity were nonexistent. She cut down the common Vertexes surrounding the other heroes one by one. With each use of the hassou tobi, her speed rose and rose. She had surpassed even the limit of which an ordinary person could follow her with their eyes.

With Wakaba's hassou tobi and sword slashes, the numbers of common Vertexes hindering the heroes dwindled in the twinkle of an eye.

"Thanks, Wakaba, we can work with this!"

"I'll shoot it down!"

"Here we go-- Hero PUNCH!"

"No more... obstructions..."

As Wakaba felled the obstructing common Vertexes, the four heroes attacked the giant's weak spots in quick succession... and destroyed them all.

The evolving Vertex tore at the seams, its large build collapsing as it let out a bizarre shriek and began to vanish.

As they watched the giant Vertex vanish, Wakaba fell straight down through the sky.

(My body... won't move...)

She was probably suffering from the recoil of using a trump card.

"Wakaba-chaaaaaan!!"

As she fell, Wakaba felt like she heard Yuuna's voice ringing in her ears.

And then--

The intense conflict that would later be called the "Battle of Marugame Castle" was all but decided. The evolved Vertex of unprecedented size was destroyed in the process of its formation.

Since most of the invading Vertexes had been used for the purpose of fusion, the remaining four heroes were easily able to sweep up what little remained of the common Vertexes.



Forestization lifted and Shikoku's normal scenery returned.

In the grounds around Marugame Castle, planted with sakura trees, Hinata walked with a brisk pace.

her eyes darted around the area as if she were looking for something.

Marugame Castle is famous for its sakura, and even the trees withered now are sure bear many flowers in the spring.

Underneath one of the sakura trees, a single girl had collapsed.

"I finally found you... Please wake up, Wakaba-chan."

Hinata called out to the girl.

She opened her eyes.

"Hina... ta...?"

Wakaba's hero outfit had disappeared and she returned to her ordinary uniform.

Hinata smiled.

"Thank goodness you're okay, Wakaba-chan..."

The Shinju's oracle had told her that Wakaba was alive and that she was within the Marugame Castle grounds, which was why Hinata had been searching for her.

Without getting up, Wakaba questioned Hinata with a hollow expression on her face.

"Is it... over...?"

"Yes. We won. Thanks to you and all the other heroes, humanity has been saved. With zero hero casualties... Everyone's safe."

"I see..."

Wakaba smiled and got up.

"... I had a little dream."

Wakaba was in elementary school in the dream.

The classmates who had been killed on the day of the Vertex attacks were standing before her. Wakaba spoke up to them. "The Vertexes aren't the only ones who need to pay for their actions... I need to pay for my sin, my failure to protect you and surviving on my own."

But they shook their heads and smiled at Wakaba.



"You see, our families are in Shikoku."

- "Thanks to your brave fight, our parents are still alive"

- "So you've already paid."

Braving the dangers of fighting the Vertex and protecting the land and its people-- That was how Wakaba was paying for her sin of failing to protect her friends.

Wakaba held back tears as she tried her best to smile.

- "In that case... I'll keep... I'll keep protecting the people who live in this land forever. That's my reward. A reward for everything... That's the Nogi way."

- "What kind of dream?"

Hinata gently asked.

Wakaba stood up and answered with a refreshed look on her face.

- "A gentle... yet grave... kind of dream."

At that moment, they heard a certain familiar, boisterous voice.

- "Ah, there she is!"

- "Thank goodness she's okay!"

- "That girl... wouldn't die that easily, you know..."

- "Wakaba-chan! We won!"

Wakaba turned around to see her friends running up to her.

(Chapter 9 END)